

Chapter 2, Description of the Proposed Action and Alternatives

2.1 Description of the Proposed Action

The Proposed Action is to transfer ownership of approximately 120 acres of federal public lands to the State Of New Mexico under the Recreation And Public Purposes Act (R&PP), for construction and management of “El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro International Heritage Center.”

The foreseeable use of the proposed transfer lands must be considered and analyzed in compliance with NEPA. Therefore, in addition to the land transfer itself, all of the foreseeable facilities, construction elements, visitor effects, and so forth, must be identified and analyzed to determine if individually or cumulatively, they constitute a significant effect upon the human environment.

The Proposed Action, therefore, includes the following known elements (described in detail in the narrative sections that follow):

- A classification of approximately 120 acres by the BLM as suitable for leasing and/or disposal under R&PP Act.
- Leasing of approximately 120 acres to the State for eventual patent if the conditions of R&PP Act are met, with the knowledge that this acreage will be utilized as a compound for development of a proposed historical tourist destination site.
 - Construction of a museum building, approximately 15,000 square feet in size. The structure will include space for exhibits, theater, classroom, gift shop, meeting room(s), and administrative offices.
 - Construction of outdoor parking lot, patios, benches, picnic tables, shelters, signage, observation deck(s), and an amphitheater.
 - Construction of one staff residence (or modular housing) with garage and workspace.
 - Construction of on-site domestic water well, storage tank, and booster station for use by the Center and staff housing.
 - Improvement, widening and possible surfacing of the existing county access road (approximately 3.5 miles).

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- On site and off site utilities, including septic system(s), above- and below-ground electrical and telephone service.
 - Construction of trails and landscaping within the proposed compound to “interpretive stations” for visitor education.
 - Possible later phase establishment of a “river walk” or horseback route (with the public providing their own horses), probably along Bureau Of Reclamation existing roads to Fort Craig.
 - Accommodation of an estimated 60,000 visitors a year (this is a median estimate within the range predicted by “El Viaje” study).
- Development of management prescriptions on public lands surrounding the Center to minimize physical intrusions upon the visible landscape.

The proposed site is located approximately 35 miles south of Socorro and 40 miles north of Truth or Consequences, 3 1/2 miles east of Interstate 25, and directly off of Socorro County Road 255 (see Map 2). The site was chosen through a feasibility study entitled “El Viaje” (cited earlier) under the direction of NM State Monuments Division, with a citizens’ advisory board, and with financial support of the cities and towns of the lower Rio Grande Valley. This vicinity was one of nine areas considered for the potential location for the facility. Initially, a site nearby was selected by the study, but this was later dropped from further consideration in favor of the selected site because of architectural criteria. This necessary change for architectural reasons effectively resolved difficulties that might have been imposed on range management, as well as other issues (see Section 2.1.2.32).

The New Mexico State Legislature and the United States Congress have appropriated funds for the construction of an International Heritage Center as a State and BLM Interpretive Center to commemorate this historic road. The Center will contain exhibits on the history of the Camino Real.

The proposal is termed an “International” Heritage Center because the historic road and the land it traverses were first the property of Spain, then Mexico, and then the United States. All three countries will participate in the Center in the future by providing displays and programs related to their historic ties to the Camino Real. There is no known International Heritage Center like this anywhere in the world. The land required for facilities, trails, and other outdoor programming is 120 acres (see Site Plan).

The building design is oriented so that it “points” to the Camino Real, in the middle-

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distance across the Rio Grande with a commanding view of the east bank of the river and eastern horizon. The linear structure is designed to incorporate much of the existing grading with minimal impact. The structure is two-story, with the lower level partially below grade.

According to “El Viaje” study, the Center is expected to attract between 27,000 and 106,000 visitors per year. This additional location for visitation is expected to extend the duration of visits to the area and supplement the economy of the communities up and down the corridor, especially in Socorro and Truth or Consequences. (Note that this topic is further analyzed in this EA and revised visitor projections and more specific economic information are presented in Sections 3.29 and 4.8.28).

The proposed museum building design accommodates 15,000 square feet of space for exhibits, theater, classroom, gift shop, and administrative functions. Surrounding the building will be outdoor patios and an amphitheater, as well as an observation deck from which to view the general landscape of the trail at a distance. All facilities will be handicapped accessible and in compliance with state, federal and local building codes. A massive rock wall north of the buildings will provide a monumental entry to the facility. A parking area is provided for the visitors to the Museum building. A Service Drive will connect County Road 255 to the west side of the Museum building, where a concrete apron will exist. (An elevation view of the building design is found on the cover of this EA)

The project is proposed in two phases of construction, with specific elements to be completed in each phase. Phase I includes the construction of the primary facilities (buildings, parking lot, etc.), and Phase II will add ancillary facilities. For example, as funding becomes available, an interpretive trail network including a maximum of six pedestrian trails will be developed within the fenced 120-acre compound. The trails will lead to “interpretive stations” where natural and historically significant features of the Camino Real will be described, such as the view toward the Jornada del Muerto, the Trinity Site, etc. Shelters, signage, benches and possibly viewing scopes will exist at these stations. As shown in the Site Plan (Figure 1), the interpretive trail leading to interpretive station “1/5” is handicapped accessible and is accessed by the Observation Deck. A long-range plan in Phase II (after the fifth year) construction includes a trail that will connect the Center to Fort Craig along the river corridor utilizing federal lands.

During Phase II, if funding becomes available, interpretive points, or works of art such as sculptures might be added along County Road 255, NM Highway 1, or Interstate 25 to draw

Photo 1
View From Proposed Center
Approximate Area Of Observation Deck
Looking East Toward Rio Grande And Camino Real



Photo 2
Jornada del Muerto
Fra Cristóbal Range On Right
Looking Southeast



El Camino Real Center

Note: Larger Scale Site Plans Are Provided With Hard Copies Of This Document



FIGURE 1

El Camino Real Center

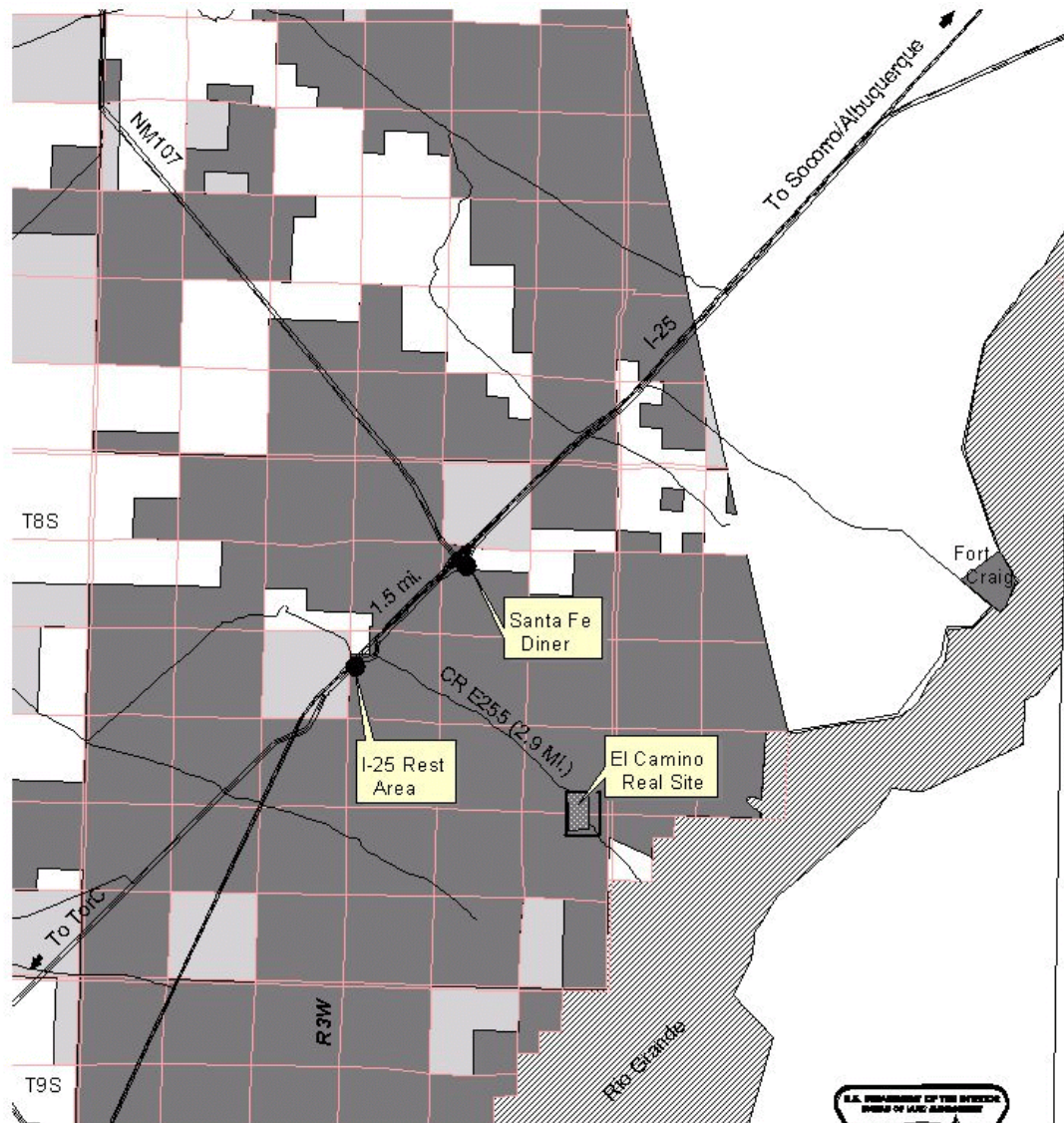
interest and attention to the proposed Center. If such additions are federal actions under NEPA, they will be subject to site-specific environmental analyses.

Staff housing is proposed to the north of the Museum facility. The housing includes 1514 square feet of residential space, as well as 710 square feet of garage and workshop space. In addition, a service yard will be located adjacent to the garage and workshop for storage of maintenance equipment. Alternatively, modular housing may be used temporarily or permanently for staff housing and storage if funding is not sufficient for conventional on-site construction.

Native vegetation surrounding the building will remain. Stabilization of the site will be provided during construction, as well as rehabilitation of any disturbed areas, following construction. Native plants will be reestablished to protect any disturbed soil surrounding the building. Temporary irrigation as well as a silt fence surrounding the building areas will protect the seeding as plants become established. Portions of the buildings' roof drainage will be collected by a cistern and used for a minimal amount of landscape irrigation surrounding the buildings (within 20'-0" of building walls). In addition, gravel-mulch and rock armoring will be provided in areas where erosion might otherwise occur. If noxious weeds become present during or after construction, appropriate eradication methods will be performed. Standard BLM specifications will be used for all of the erosion, seeding, and site mitigation procedures (see Site Plan for locations).

On-site utilities include a water supply well and storage tank with a booster station, a septic tank and leech field, a waterline, fire line, and sewer line. Overhead and underground lines will provide power and telephone service to the site. Underground utilities will be placed in areas close to the facilities, where visual intrusions are desired to be minimized. Transformers will be located at the electrical load centers. In addition, LPG tanks will provide propane gas (refer to Site Plan for locations). All required construction permits, including State Engineer permits for the water well, will be obtained or overseen by the architect. The 120-acre compound will be fenced to BLM range fence standards, and two cattle guards will be installed where County Road 255 passes through opposite sides of the compound.

El Camino Real Center



**MAP 2
PROPOSED EL CAMINO REAL
INTERNATIONAL HERITAGE CENTER**

- Legend**
- Private Land
 - State Land
 - Public Land

2 0 2 4 Miles



2.2 Alternatives To The Proposed Action

Note: For definitions and descriptions of the Level I and Level II Avoidance Areas, visual classes, etc., please refer to Appendix A. These “Avoidance Levels” correspond to the importance of the viewing landscape surrounding the proposed Center and indicate that new proposals within the defined areas for each alternative would be handled on a case-by-case basis to ensure that visual and other effects upon these areas would be either acceptable, mitigated, or not authorized. Avoidance Level I would be managed to correspond to Visual Resource Management (VRM) Class I and Avoidance Level II would correspond to VRM Class II. Note also that both Avoidance levels include the provisions for a change in classification in Off Road Vehicle designation from “Open” to “Limited to existing roads and trails,” and the addition of gas and oil leasing stipulation SRA-3 (“no surface occupancy”) as defined in the Socorro RMP.

Alternative 1

This alternative includes the proposed action described in Section 2.1 plus management stipulations on certain surrounding public lands. Please refer to Alternative 1 (Map 3). This alternative would provide an Avoidance Level I area, with corresponding management stipulations (defined in Appendix A), on the ridge top bounding County road 255, between the rims of Simon Canyon on the north and Sheep Canyon on the south. The Avoidance Level I area expands to angle northeast toward Mesa Del Contadero and southeast toward the Fra Cristóbal range, encompassing an area of approximately 9,632 acres. Avoidance Level II areas are defined between a line 200 feet east of the existing electrical power transmission line on the east side of I-25, to the borders of the Avoidance Level I area as shown. The Avoidance Level II area with VRM Class II management stipulations for this alternative encompasses approximately 6,082 acres.

By managing the described public lands within these two VRM Classes, the historic setting of the El Camino Real would be maintained. The El Camino Real Heritage Center is the primary viewing location, or Key Observation Point (KOP), for visitors using the area. Additionally, views along the access road to the Center are of concern in maintaining the scenic quality of the area.

Alternative 2

This alternative includes the proposed action described in Section 2.1 plus management stipulations on certain surround public lands. Please refer to Alternative 2 (Map 4). This alternative is very similar to Alternative 1, except it adds an Avoidance Level I “strip” approximately ½ mile wide along the eastern border of I-25 and the existing power line. Under this alternative, approximately 10,913 acres of public land would be managed as VRM Class I, and approximately 4,801 acres would be managed as VRM Class II. The

purpose of this added Avoidance Level I zone would be to limit visual intrusions along the route leading to the proposed Center, and maintain views from I-25 and NM 1 toward the Center.

Alternative 3

This alternative includes the proposed action described in Section 2.1 plus management stipulations on certain surround public lands. Please refer to Alternative 4 (Map 5). This alternative provides smaller Avoidance Level I and Avoidance Level II areas, and focuses primarily on portions of the landscape which can be most easily seen from the County access road (255) and the proposed Center. The southern most portion of the Avoidance Level I areas indicated in Alternatives 1 and 2 are dropped from this alternative. The Avoidance Level II areas north and south of County 255 are defined by the rims of canyons and other land forms which create natural divisions in the visible landscape.

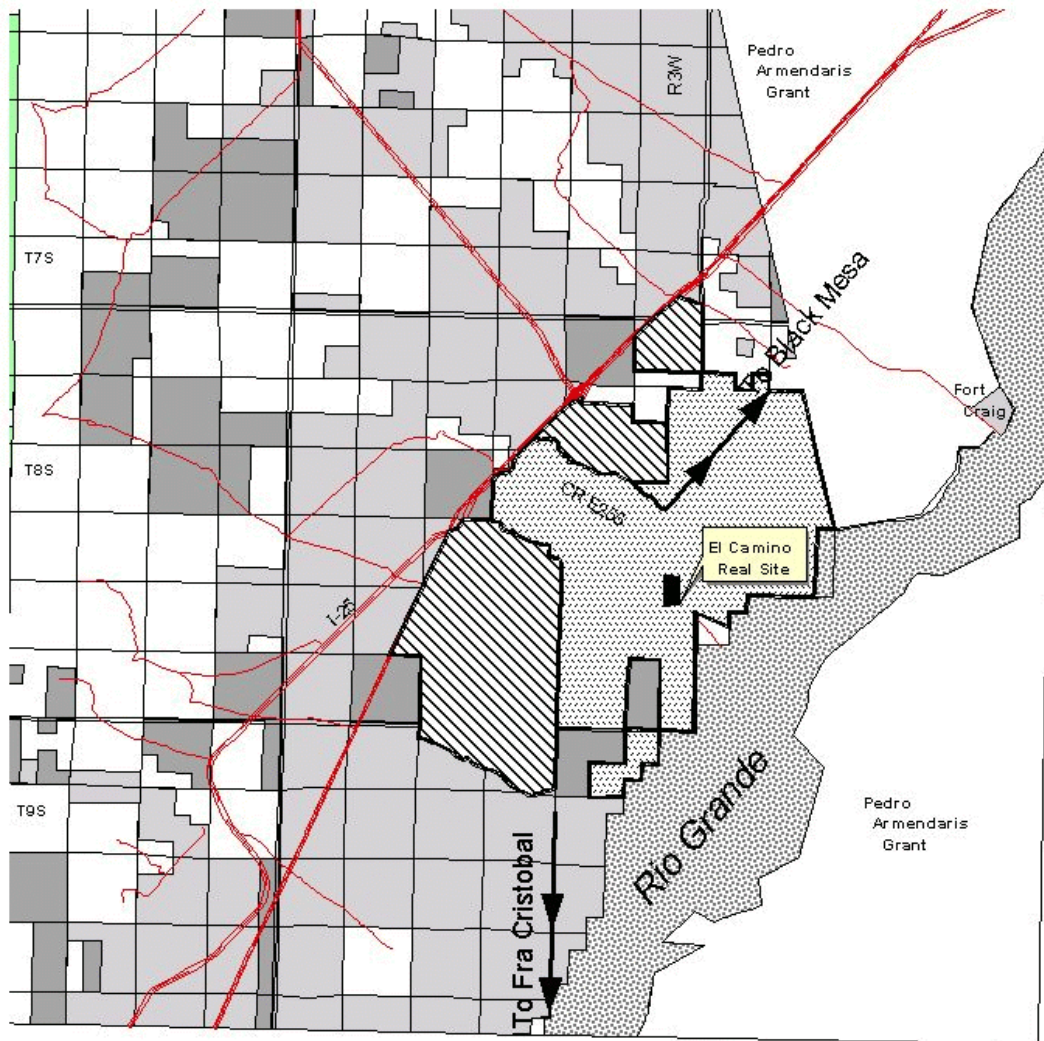
Under Alternative 3, the Avoidance Level I area managed under VRM Class I would total approximately 8,506 acres, and the Avoidance Level II areas managed under VRM Class II would total approximately 3,456 acres.

Alternative 4

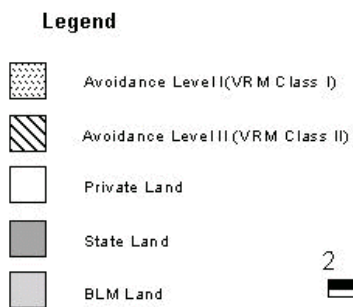
This alternative includes the proposed action described in Section 2.1 plus management stipulations on certain surround public lands. Please refer to Alternative 4 (Map 6). This alternative includes no Avoidance Level I areas. Instead, it provides Avoidance Level II provisions for a relatively large area of public lands east of I-25 and NM 1. This Alternative would be similar to Alternative 1, however the potential for impacts to visual resources within the project area would be greater. Approximately 16,033 acres within the Avoidance Level II area would be managed as a VRM Class II.

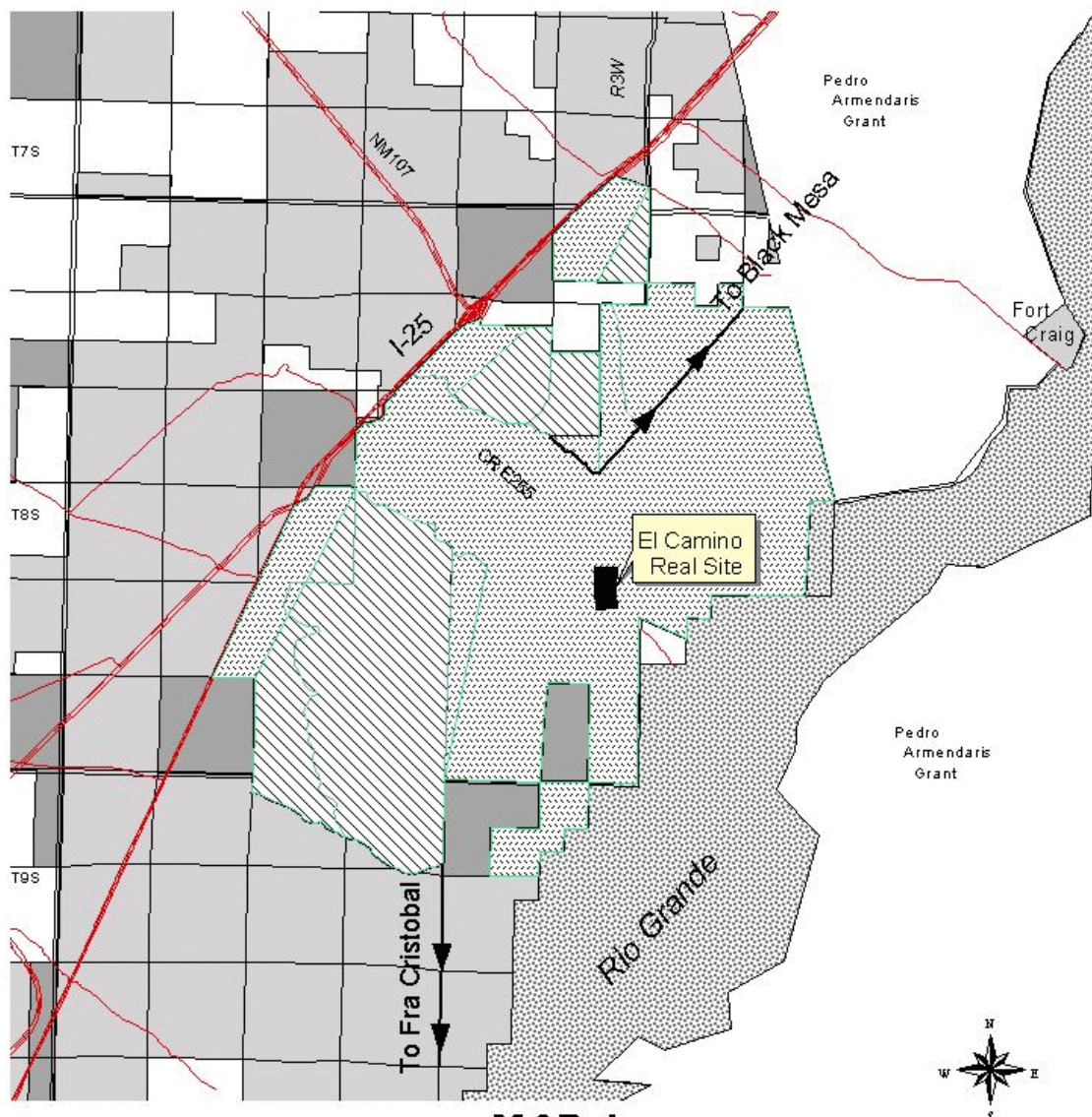
Alternative 5

This alternative includes the proposed action described in Section 2.1 with no change in management stipulations on surrounding public lands.

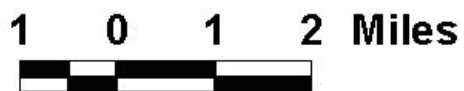


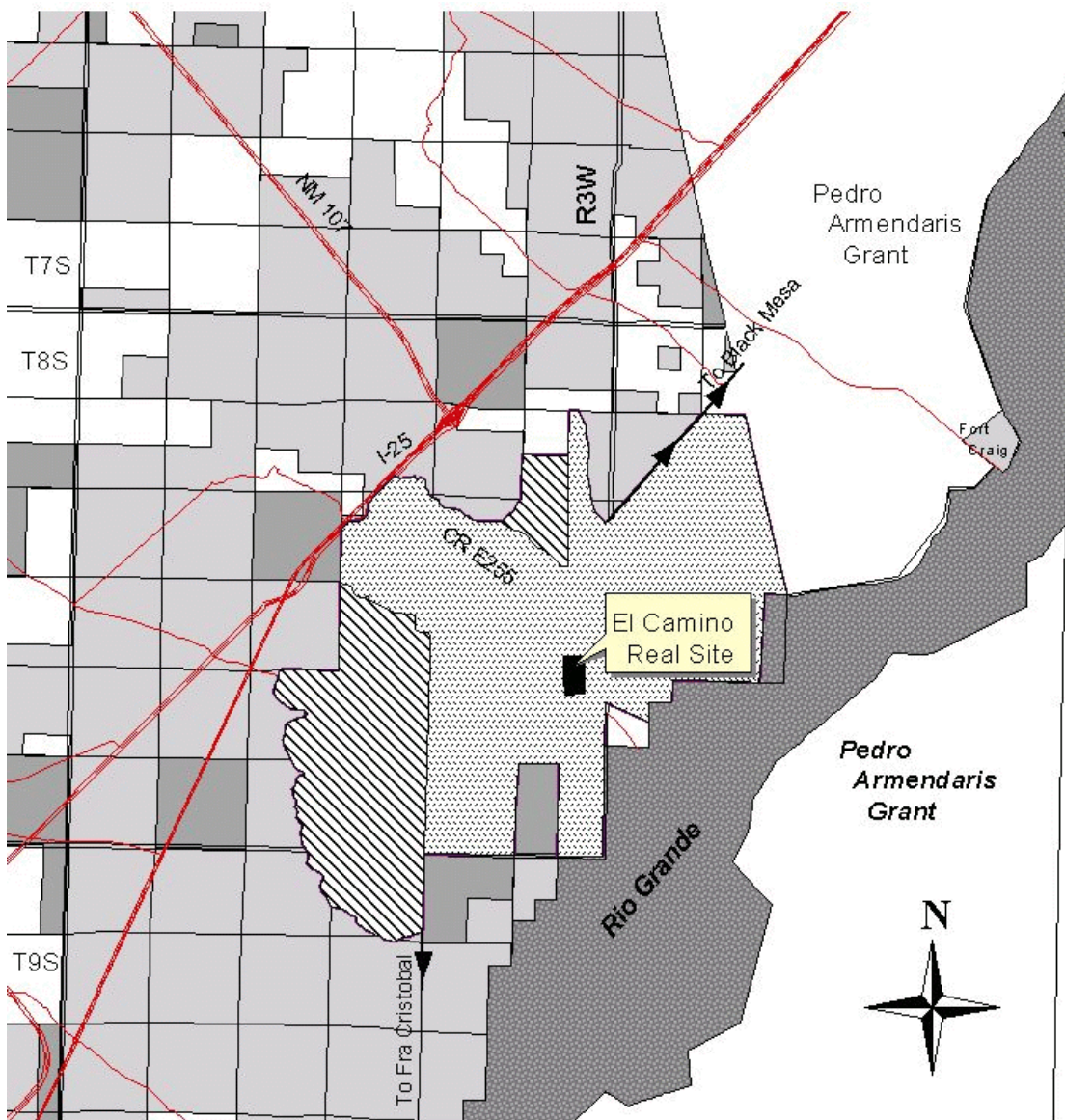
MAP 3 PROPOSED EL CAMINO REAL ALTERNATIVE 1





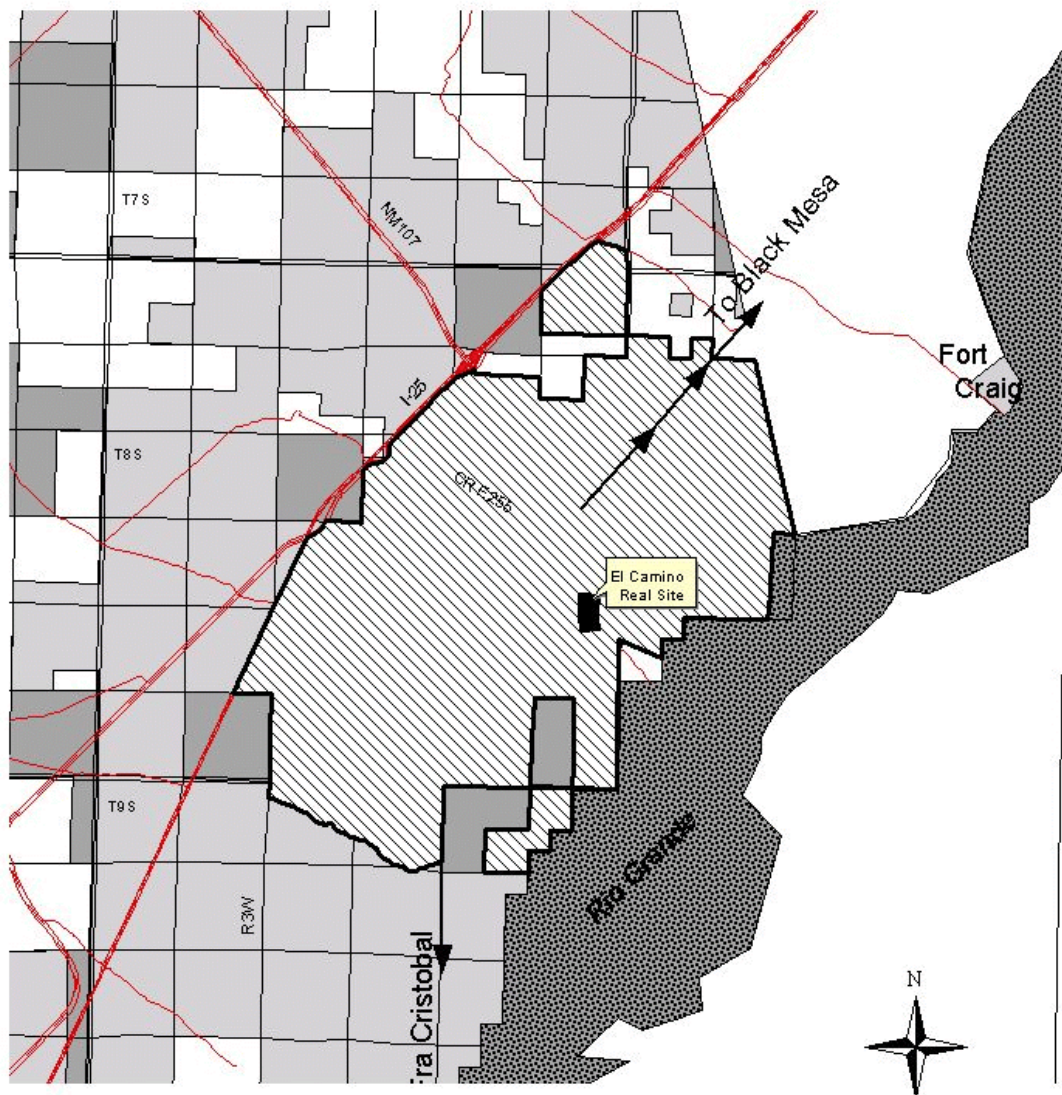
MAP 4
PROPOSED EL CAMINO REAL
ALTERNATIVE 2





MAP 5
PROPOSED EL CAMINO REAL
ALTERNATIVE 3





**MAP 6
PROPOSED EL CAMINO REAL
ALTERNATIVE 4**



Summary Table of Alternatives for Management of Surrounding Public Lands

	Avoidance Level II Acreage	Avoidance Level I Acreage
Alternative 1	6,082	9,632
Alternative 2	4,801	10,913
Alternative 3	3,456	8,506
Alternative 4	16,033	None
Alternative 5	None	None
No Action - see 2.3 below	-	-

2.3 Description of the No Action Alternatives for All Proposed Actions

- A. The “no action” alternative for the transfer of public lands to the State of New Mexico is to deny the R&PP Act application.
- B. The “no action” alternative for the construction of the proposed Center is also to deny the R&PP Act application.
- C. The “no action” alternative for proposed changes in the management of public lands surrounding the proposed Center is to allow the existing management situation to continue (Alternative 5).

2.4 Alternatives Considered But Eliminated from Detailed Analysis

2.4.1 Alternative Locations

In January, 1994, Architectural Research Consultants, Inc. published the results of their siting study commissioned by Museum of New Mexico State Monuments, entitled, “El Viaje: A Planning Study For The Camino Real Interpretive Center.” This 63 page report plus eight appendices documents an extensive site location study for the proposed Center. It was submitted by the State to the BLM as part of the R&PP Act application package for the proposed project. The study was funded in part by all the communities of the southern Rio Grande in New Mexico, including Los Lunas, Belen, Socorro, Truth Or Consequences, and Las Cruces. The study was overseen by a citizens advisory board, and workshops were held with local citizens of the region with the theme of “community-

based planning.” The study identified six possible locations for the proposed Center. These were:

1. Bernado – NW Corner of U.S. 60 and NM 304
2. Escondida – 6.5 miles east and south of I-25 Escondida Exit
3. Highway 1 – On NM 1 north of San Marcial
4. San Pedro – South of U.S. 380 on east side of Rio Grande
5. Fort Craig – 4.5 miles east of NM 1, south of San Marcial
6. Fra Cristóbal – East of I-25 25 miles south of Socorro

A seventh site called “San Diego” was eliminated earlier in the study because it was close to Fort Seldon and the Las Cruces Farm and Ranch Museum.

The sites were ranked on the basis of 31 selection criteria and the Fra Cristóbal site received the highest score. The Fra Cristóbal site is the general area proposed for the Center.

Initially, a site within the Fra Cristóbal area was identified for the Center on a gravel ridge formation along a county road between Lumbré Canyon on the north and Crawford Canyon on the south. A preliminary feasibility review of the location revealed serious issues regarding potential costs and the suitability of the site for the construction of the facilities. The county road leading to the location passed over an overpass of I-25 but had no direct access to the interstate. Exit and access ramps to I-25 would have added excessive costs to the proposed Center. Other issues raised by BLM Socorro Field Office were that the location was near the center of a large grazing pasture, which would complicate and possibly degrade good grazing practices. Also, the road leading to the site continued east to the Rio Grande where New Mexico State Parks manages the northernmost (unimproved) boat landing for Elephant Butte Lake, known as “Catfish Camp.” These factors might have resulted in conflicting management purposes in the immediate area.

Engineering and architectural issues resulted in seeking an alternative site within the Fra Cristóbal area. The tract of land presently under application by the State resolved the engineering and architectural issues, and the proposed design is engineered specifically to the land forms of the location. At the same time, this effectively resolved the local BLM concerns by moving the public facilities to the northern edge of the grazing pasture, where potential effects upon forage utilization and cattle movement would be lessened. This location also eliminated the potential of incompatible management purposes of the Center in close proximity to the fishing and camping site managed by State Parks.

Although the site selection process was completed prior to the R&PP Act application, the

State conducted a well-devised and open public process, which included public participation in local work groups and a site ranking process which included consideration of a wide variety of economic and environmental issues.

2.4.2 Alternative Facilities Designs

The presently proposed design for the Center facilities is the culmination of an evolutionary process, which took place over a number of years prior to the R&PP Act application. An initial concept for the Center was to construct an exceptionally unique and striking structure within sight of Interstate 25. Part of this concept was that the structure would act as its own “sign,” drawing traffic off the interstate to investigate its purpose. A Mexican architectural firm was contracted to design the facility (in the initial Fra Cristóbal location described above). The resulting design was in fact unique, resembling a long, U-shaped rectangular box, nearly half of which was suspended in space off the edge of a gravel ridge. This design proved so unusual that it was eventually dropped due to major reservations about its construction and funding in the New Mexico State Legislature. A series of alternative designs were proposed prior to the acceptance of the design submitted in the R&PP Act application. The selected design is engineered specifically for the proposed site, with details such as incorporating an existing arroyo head as an outside vantage point with windows for the lower level of the structure.

2.4.3 Alternative Management Of Surrounding Public Lands

Prior to the RMPA/EA process, the BLM considered a temporary mineral withdrawal of approximately 11,000 acres surrounding the proposed Center location. The purpose of the proposal was to preserve the existing landscape while planning for the Center was in progress (with the assumption that the withdrawal would become permanent later). Temporary withdrawals are done administratively by a local office petitioning the Secretary of Interior. One element of such a petition is a description of local support or opposition to the withdrawal. Local opinions, especially in Sierra County, were found to be very strongly in opposition to changes in the existing multiple use of public lands. A withdrawal process under these circumstances can be very lengthy, so it was decided to proceed with this EA and let the analyses determine whether or not a withdrawal was needed as part of the management of surrounding federal public lands. The findings of these analyses are presented throughout this document. Specifically, the mineral report for the 120 acre tract under consideration for transfer to the State (Appendix C) has indicated a low potential for locatable minerals. This report suggests that if an alternative is selected which includes management stipulations on surrounding public lands, then withdrawal from hardrock mining may have little or no negative social or economic effect, while it could have a positive social and economic effect by protecting the tax payer investment in the long-term use of the proposed Center. Any future withdrawal under the

mining law will require a broader focused mineral report to cover the actual lands in question (if Alternative 1 through 4 is selected), and should be evaluated in terms of potential economic effects and the continuation of other aspects of multiple use of the public lands.